

Farm to School BC's Vancouver Area Regional Hub Learning Lab

About the Vancouver Area Regional Hub

From 2013 to 2015, Farm to School BC's Vancouver Area Regional Hub initiated and conducted Canada's first Learning Lab to work with key individuals throughout the Vancouver Board of Education to help change the way food was purchased for cafeterias and food programs.

The Vancouver Board of Education has a large, urban, and multicultural enrollment of over 56,000 children and youth from kindergarten to grade 12, including some of the highest and lowest income urban neighbourhoods in the country. Engaging children in hands-on food system education and food literacy increases the amount of healthy, local and sustainable food that children and youth get to see, eat, touch and work with and is a critical component of engaging the next generation of British Columbians to value local agriculture and the local food system.

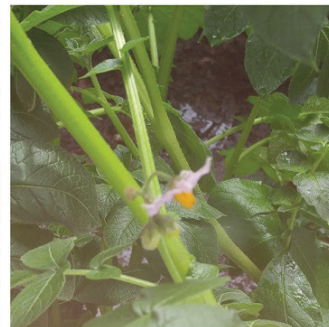
According to a national survey conducted by Farm to Cafeteria Canada in 2013, Farm to School programs have shown great success in improving local food economies and local food environments, enhancing health and nutrition of students and revitalizing communities through the support of local and sustainable agriculture and the resulting protection of farmland.

Goals of the Learning Lab

The Learning Lab began with a shared vision to help key staff develop goals that increased the purchasing of local, sustainable and healthy food and create realistic and practical avenues to achieve success. By working at the procurement level, the Learning Lab aimed to create positive change in systemic and school level purchasing.

Together, the Learning Lab group committed to six goals and completed a variety of activities in their pursuit:

1. Increase procurement of local and/or sustainable food:
 - a. Established baseline for local product purchasing
 - b. Identified areas for increasing purchasing of local, sustainable produce
2. Procure foods that model sound nutritional practice for students:
 - a. Developed key recommendations for shifting the purchasing system including:
 - i. Worked with major supplier to ensure purchasers could more readily identify local food in catalogue and online;



- ii. Explored the development of contracts/ purchasing orders with local farms.
3. Create a knowledgeable and engaged school community for local, healthy and sustainable food:
 - a. Hosted three workshops for parents, students, staff and cooks to help them meet provincial food safety requirements; and
 - b. Developed a Farm to School Guide illustrating the value and instructions on how to meet the Guidelines for Food and Beverage Sales in BC Schools, produce food on school sites and use seasonally aligned menus that source locally available food throughout the school year.
4. Provide training and support to develop capacity to procure local and sustainable food:
 - a. Hosted two test kitchens with school staff to develop 12 recipes (six entrees and six sandwiches) that:
 - i. Use seasonal ingredients;
 - ii. Are costed for cafeteria service; and
 - iii. Meet provincial guidelines.
 - b. Promoted seasonally based, local food centred recipes for use in Local, Seasonal Celebrations, Farm to School Guide, and special events like Farm to School Gathering;
 - c. Created Farm to School video;
 - d. Engaged three schools to begin local, seasonal celebrations including:
 - i. Serving seasonal recipes once a week;
 - ii. Development of marketing materials (e.g., table tent cards, shelf talkers, posters, media releases, etc.);
 - iii. Hosting of taste tests for students; and
 - iv. Promotion of local food within curriculum (through cafeteria classes) and extra-curricular routes (including lunch time events).

Who Was Involved and Consulted?

- Educators
- School support staff (including cooks)
- A major food distributor
- Community Organizations:
 - Farm to Cafeteria Canada (Sponsor)
 - Farm Folk City Folk
 - Farm to School BC
 - Fresh Roots Urban Farm Society
 - Social Planning and Research Council of BC (Sponsor)
 - Vancouver Board of Education
- Vancouver Coastal Health

Successes of the Learning Lab

The Learning Lab left the Vancouver Board of Education in a strong position to become a leader in local food procurement in Canada. It focused on providing tools to change buying practices through large-scale contracted suppliers, while also engaging and supporting schools to buy directly from local urban farms, such as Fresh Roots Urban Farm and the Edible Garden Project. It was the first Farm to School Learning Lab in Canada and influenced institutional supply chains across Metro Vancouver.

The key outcomes of the work were:

- Establishment of a baseline of products purchased from within the region and province that identified tools and showcased opportunities for increased local purchasing;
- Development of a Test Kitchen Model to support schools to meet provincial guidelines;
- Hosting of several successful Test Kitchens and the creation and promotion of seasonally aligned, cost-appropriate recipes for schools;
- Supported the establishment of Schoolyard Market Gardens at Vancouver Technical Secondary and David Thompson Secondary. These are commercially productive educational farms on school grounds; and
- Supported education and support staff within the Vancouver Board of Education to create internal models of purchasing and food service that increase the supply of local food into the school system.

Looking to the Future

Over time the Vancouver Learning Lab saw a shift in priorities towards advancing support specifically in the food literacy/curriculum aspects of Farm to School in the region. In these efforts, Farm to School BC's Vancouver Area Hub Animator continues to play a central convening role and many of the original partners continue to collaborate on these efforts.

As a direct result of the work sparked by the Farm to School Vancouver Area Regional Hub Learning Lab, UBC Farm began its own two Learning Labs to increase local food procurement by healthcare institutions.



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